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ABSTRACT

For one instructor, the thought that introducing hypertext into a writing class would immediately revolutionize that environment proved to be naive. The cautions issued by some academics--that hypertext may "disempower" student writers, took on a real urgency in his class. At this point, there are a number of paradigms already established as the process of theorizing about hypertext begins, paradigms that have not been fully tested, such as: (1) the author becomes less of an intimidating figure; (2) the reader assumes more agency; and (3) the text becomes more fluid and unstable. Using the computer program set up for the class, students could open an essay, create a text block to be linked, open a comment window and write, and then link the comment to the text block. They could also create a comment and then import another essay (perhaps their own) into the stack. Not surprisingly, students found it most difficult to deal with issues of ethos, with the nature of the narrative voice, and the identity of the fictive self speaking the essays. What was surprising was the depth of student resistance, the fact that they took the personal essay so personally. What was lost, they felt, was the sense of ownership or, to put it another way, the sense of a unique voice. Student comments testify to a widespread uneasiness with computer-generated community texts, particularly among women, who viewed the comments affixed to their texts as a kind of violation. (Contains 16 references.) (TB)

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"Towards a Rhetoric of the Hyperessay"

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I should probably append a qualification to the title of this paper: "Towards a Rhetoric of the Hyperessay: A Cautionary Tale." I naively assumed, as probably many of us have, that introducing hypertext into a writing class would immediately revolutionize that environment. In practice it doesn't work out that way, at least it did not for my class. The cautions issued by Carolyn Handa and Johndan Johnson-Eilola--that hypertext may "disempower" student writers, that "student writers may discover that their sense of authority over the hypertext is also infinitely deferred, their voices insignificant" (Johnson-Eilola, 211), thus defeating a major pedagogical goal, took on real urgency in my use of hypertext in a class studying and writing personal essays.

A few years ago I contributed to a scholarly dialogue, largely in the pages of College English, about the nature of the personal essay and its pedagogical applications. In my February 1992 piece, "Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal Essay," I opposed what I saw as the theory that the essay is democratic, and hence should have a central role in composition pedagogy, and I took issue with writers like Chris Anderson, Graham Good, and Kurt Spellmeyer. I questioned the assumptions that the essay is formless, universally accessible, and grounded in the essayist's personal experience; and I argued that we should re-envision the essay as a cultural product, a "special kind of collective discourse" (127).

It seemed perfectly natural, then, when the opportunity arose to teach an Advanced Exposition course, that I use the hypertext program I was developing with a programmer at Illinois State to interrogate the conventional definitions of the

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personal essay. In the end, what seemed to be most clearly challenged in our class hyperessay was the rhetoric of voice and authorial presence.

On the most global level, most of the major theorists about hypertext--Bolter, Landow, Lanham, among others--have made the basic premise, I believe, that technological change will force pedagogical/ideological change. That may or may not be true; I think it's a little too early to tell yet. David N. Dobrin's objection that "media are [not] where you pin your hopes for social change" (309-10) may be a plausible criticism of hypertext, but the likeliest scenario is that media and pedagogical theory and praxis will change symbiotically.

A number of paradigms have already been established as we begin the process of theorizing about hypertext and its impact on pedagogy. As Thomas Kuhn might observe, at this stage in the hypertext revolution those paradigms have not been fully tested and have not replaced current paradigms. For example:

•The Death of the Author. Landow, in fact explicitly makes the connection to Barthe's famous conceit, but almost every author writing on hypertext makes the same point: the traditional authority of the writer is undermined because the reader takes a more active and creative role in the construction of the text. "The author is no longer an intimidating figure, not a prophet or a Mosaic legislator in Shelley's sense," Bolter comments (153). Johndan Johnson-Eilola adds that "In constructive hypertexts... the original author-text's authority begins to evaporate..." (207). As an important corollary for the genre of the personal essay: narrative voice is drastically redefined.

• Readers assume more agency. For Lanham, the rhetorical elements of style and content become "user-definable" in electronic texts (especially hypertexts); "...the figure of the hypertext author approaches, even if it does not entirely merge with, that of the reader; the fuctions of reader and writer become more deeply entwined with each other than ever before" (71), Landow writes. Bolter makes the point

specifically in the context of the essay: "A hypertextual essay in the computer is always a dialogue between the writer and his or her readers, and the reader has to share the responsibility for the outcome" (117).

•The instability and fluidity of the text. On one hand, many of the commentators on hypertext envision the media as a direct attack on traditional textuality, like Davida Charney's claim that "Hypertext has the potential to change fundamentally ... how we conceive of text itself" (239). On the other hand, even enthusiasts for hypertexts point out, like Stuart Moulthrop and Nancy Kaplan, that "Hypertext represents an evolutionary outgrowth of late-modern textuality"(221). Lanham, in "Literary Study and the Digital Revolution," celebrates most unreservedly the "fundamental irresolution" of the digital text (7).

An early and important article in Computers and Composition by Anne and Mike DiPardo explored the use of HyperCard in the expository classroom. The DiPardos created a hypertext program called "Towards the Metapersonal Essay" which guided students through smaller assignments, ending finally in a linear essay that had been through hypertextual versions. Thematically, students used linkage in hypertext to alternate between private and public expression. The DiPardos used their hypertext program for singular writers, and that may explain why they did not seem to meet the same resistances that I met. Their piece was largely a theoretical exploration of, and celebration of, the pedagogical potentials of HyperCard; they did not attempt to delve into the rhetoric of what they called the "metapersonal essay." But they did envision that "Finished products could be easily compiled into a classroom magazine accessed, along with samples of professional writing, by future generations of students" (12). Essentially, this is what my class of juniors and seniors tried out.

The networked hypertext program we used in my Advanced Exposition class was definitely still under construction. And it has been considerably revised, of

course, as a result of that class experience. Essentially, this server-based program, developed by myself and Bill Prigge at Illinois State University, allows students to link comments to essays imported from conventional readers, to import their own papers, to link comments to their papers and to link comments to comments. The theoretical base for the HyperCard-based program, called Writing Circles, was both the collaborative writing theory of Ede, Lunsforde, and Gere (the title was borrowed from Gere, of course), and my own research into the writing processes of British women writers in the 1790s and the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The idea of conversation and the salon/family circle informed my conceptualization for the program from the start, and I've always been worried that the interface did not exploit that conceptual base enough. Interestingly, Catherine F. Smith, at the end of her chapter on "Hypertextual Thinking," suggests that "Talk, theorized as conversation and analyzed as discourse," may provide an effective template for hypertext programs (281).

Writing Circles offers basically two new pull-down menus, one for students and one for teachers. As first conceived, students could make a new comment, delete a private comment, import a student file, and change their passwords. The teacher had the power to import an RTF file, make a link block, erase a block, and erase a link. We quickly discovered that this limited the powers and access of students. They could not decide which text scraps to block; they couldn't erase a block of text nor could they erase a link. And they couldn't import "authoritarian" texts into the locked "Essay" stack. They felt very hemmed in by this, and almost immediately I gave them my password and let them log in as an instructor.

What the students could do, then, was to open an essay (authoritarian or student), create a text block to be linked, open a comment window and write a comment, and then link the comment to the text block. They could also create a comment and then import another essay (perhaps their own) into the stack. In later

versions of the program they have the power to make a comment but keep it private, deciding later (if ever) to "publish" the comment publicly over the network. Initially, we simply replied to some "authoritarian" essays, linking comments to Nancy Marrs's "On Being A Cripple," but the final class project was to create a hyper-class-essay, a linked collection of what the students chose as their best essays from the semester. In the end, they elected to take one student's essay--a piece on writing, modeled after Didion and Orwell's "Why I Write" and other essayists' essays on essays--and linked their essays and comments to that base essay. This was, they told me, the only way they could "make sense" of all the hypertextual links.

Not surprisingly, students found it most difficult to deal with issues of ethos, with the nature of the narrative voice and the identity of the fictive self speaking the essays. What did surprise me was the profundity and depth of their resistance, the fact that they took the personal essay so, well, personally.

I should add that I had discussed my plans to create a collective hyperessay from the first day of class, and further that the class created a conventional class portfolio. Each student also created a portfolio which accounted for three-quarters of the class grade. Every essay, in rough and final draft, had been posted on the server for anyone in the class to read. Finally, throughout the semester we had done extensive peer review, one-on-one, in groups of three, whole-class workshops, and on-line class discussions through Daedalus. The intervention and editing of each other's essays had been a factor in the class from the beginning. Yet casting the essays into hypertext and "publishing" those essays on the server seemed to many of the students a fundamental difference.

What is lost, my students felt, was the sense of ownership or, to put it another way, the sense of a unique voice. I found it fascinating that they so explicitly made the connection between ownership and voice. "When text is taken into... hypertext format,"one student wrote, "the essay, as we have come to know it, dies. We lose

the words of one writer, those thoughts and emotions so direct and individual. What takes its place are new thoughts and emotions, those of a community of writers." "I began to feel as if my essay wasn't mine anymore. It was full of the thoughts and insights of at least ten other people."Another student wrote explicitly about how voice in a hyperessay affects "the implications of ownership."

Terry Eagleton has pointed out the premise by which we equate a text with a writer, that the text "is just a kind of transcript of the living voice of a real man or woman addressing us" (120). The personal essay, of course, particularly encourages this thinking. Faced with the transformation of their personal essays into hyperessays, my students extended this concept a step further: their texts became part of their personal spatial world, and the hypertextualization of their personal essays became invasive. "This is how I feel about the effects of linking each other's essays: it is an invasion of privacy," wrote one student, who felt that her "work can't be compared, or linked, to other's work."

"It's like the days when I hid my little Diary," wrote another student.

> My brothers loved to get in there and scribble all over with their gross and disgusting jokes. They made a mockery of my emotions and intimate thoughts. I think we need to guard all of our work like a Diary. Once we lose respect for our work, we lose respect for ourselves.

Finally, a third student declared: "The essay is like a child--nurtured--cared for. To see someone destroy it, change it, violate it, is like having your child raped."

Significantly, all three of these last writers are women. That they should conceive of hypertextualization, of what happened in the class, as invasive and violating is disturbing, to say the least. It's made me rethink and rethink what happened in the class and how I might prevent it the next time around. While nearly all the writers, male or female, felt the hyperessay was an attack on their selves, how that reaction was expressed was clearly gendered. Billie J. Wahlstrom,

along with other feminists, has noted that "Making students computer-literate on networks may not enable them to find a voice once they leave the classroom" (182); as Ruth Perry and Lisa Greber have pointed out, "the relation of gender to technology ... has yet to be written" (74), and my very rudimentary study suggests that the gendered ramifications of voice in hypertext deserves much more research. According to a recent email message from Wahlstrom, 94% of Wide World Web users were male in a January 1994 survey.

A few students commented on the role of readers and the effect on structure in the hyperessay. When those students did remark on the role of the reader in a hypertextual essay, they were generally enthusiastic and cast the relationship between writer and reader as a dialogue. "The reader is no longer a completely passive participant in this relationship," one student wrote, "they have the chance to talk back." "This program simply allows the reader more options," another student wrote, disputing the idea that hypertext disrupts an essay's structure.

But indeed most students found creating a hyperessay disruptive, even "schizophrenic." "Textual unity isn't completely destroyed," one of my students wrote, "because the links are based mostly on subject matter... but the unity is certainly disturbed." Another student observed: "The essay becomes a rambling river of links and comments, a hundred different voices, each thought a single drop of water. They ramble and twist, yet together, there is a special sort of unity, and cohesiveness--a harmony." What the nature of that cohesiveness is isn't explained, but it may be the environment of the class or the software package itself. Another student found the whole experience of hypertext unsettling: "It's impossible for me to read an essay, stop my train of thought, read another reader's ideas, and then pick up my first thought and continue the reading analysis." It's important to repeat that students chose one student's essay, a piece on writing, as a "base" essay with which to link other essays and comments. Hence they did impose a structure of their own,

a structure that made referential sense, since many of the linked texts referred to or illustrated aspects of the writing process mentioned in the base essay.

This experience with hypertext and the personal essay substantiates, I think, what Lanham, Bolter, Landow, and others have been asserting about hypertext: that it redefines what a text is and what we do with texts in the classroom, what Lanham calls the "repurposing" of texts and art. My students knew immediately that a hyperessay is not a personal essay. "In our project," one of my students commented, "we were really trying to fit our conception of "essay" into a framework that it wasn't necessarily meant to inhabit." This is not a good or a bad thing in and of itself; but it will become the burden of every teacher to decide how and if to use hypertext in the classroom. Necessarily, however, I do believe that hypertext will force us to invent a new "digital rhetoric," to borrow from Lanham.

What would a rhetoric of the hyperessay look like? To speculate, based on my own and my students' experience: we may retain some questions of voice, style, reader response, content, but they will be reshaped, recontextualized. What will be important is a rhetoric of the link--the dynamics of hypertextual links, how links change voice, style, argument, reader response, content, etc. By the nature of hypertext itself, there will still be a home page, a base essay, that will provide some sort of foundation for asking questions about rhetoric. For the personal hyperessay itself, I think, questions of standpoint and voice will be paramount, and an analysis of a hyper essay will be an analysis of the effect of links on perspective and voice.

In fact it will be the gaps and jumps between perspectives, voices, subjects, styles, that will become the focus of rhetorical theory revamped by hypertext. Perhaps, to follow out the threads that Bolter, Landow, and Gregory Ulmer have already dangled, a hyperessay--or in fact any hypertext--will be a concrete and systematic manifestation of the Derridean gap, the lapses and absences within a text. Instead of looking for consistency in structure or tone in an essay, for example, in a

hyperessay we will look for change--how did this jump alter the perspective? How did that link bring in material that is peripheral but suggests a different strand of thought? How has style changed from this node to that? To speak intelligently about such matters, however, we need to keep track of our navigations through the hypertext.

So the mapping of links--a virtual path of where the reader has been, or what path he/she has created by forging new links--will be an essential element in this hyper-rhetoric. Several different mapping functions or graphical browsers are available. Although two recent studies have shown that they "had no effect on recall, comprehension, or recall of text structure" (Wenger and Payne), such spatial configurations will be neccessary for analysis of a hypertext. Again, I think Lanham is very prescient here, suggesting that future rhetorical theory will not be able to eschew "visual thinking," but will have to deal with spatial and iconic expression *as well as* verbal text; Lanham quotes Susanne Langer on the simultaneous, not successive, nature of visual forms (77).

Lanham's invocation of Langer seems relevant in this discussion, on a couple of grounds. My students, in their analysis of our collective "hyperessay," commented on the feelings that the experience aroused in them. "Feeling was ... lost when hypertext came into play," one student observed; and another added, " I am not angry at this wonderful use of technology, but I do feel that it invaded my inner thoughts and feelings." Students felt that hypertextualizing their essays violated their own feelings and lost the "feeling" in everyone's essays. Catherine Smith (270-76) applies Langer's idea of "thick cognition" and Walter Kintsch's theories of discourse analysis to suggest that we need a fuller understanding of how hypertext reading/creating takes place: a complex, messy mapping of nodes and links followed by an integrative process that validates some links over others. Such a

theory would help elucidate a dimension of personal essays--hyper or not--which has largely been ignored by critics: the emotions represented and felt in an essay.

But to come back to the cautionary tale: a lot of thinking, research, and classroom experimentation has to go on before we can effectively redefine (for students and ourselves) textual structures, including those of the essay. Lanham declares flatly that "the essay will no longer be the basic unit of writing instruction" after the introduction of hypertext (127). Well, not as we know it now, probably, but we will likely redefine, "repurpose" the essay to fit a new pedagogy and a new technology. Whatever changes we make, we will have to make gradually and carefully. As Johnson-Eilola notes, "hypertext is useful as a measure of the inadequacies of current pedagogy" (203).

I will let one of my students, an English ed major, close. She worries that hypertext would be disastorous for beginning writers "because they would not feel as if the piece was their own creation" and because they would "be receiving mixed messages about the actual characteristics of an essay." Her essay points out exactly what I discovered in a class dabbling with "hyperessays": that hypertext implies institutional, ideological, pedagogical, even personal re-vision as well as technological change.

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